DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 349 EA 019 557

AUTHOR Wimpelberg, Robert K.; Ginsberg, Rick
TITLE Prescription, Ceremony, or "Trickle Down": How Do National Commissions Try to Reform Education?
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 34p.; Revised draft of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC, April 20-24, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Assessment; *Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Organizational Theories; Outcomes of Education; Symbolism
IDENTIFIERS National Commission on Excellence in Education; *National Commission Reports; Nation at Risk (A); *Supply Side Economics

ABSTRACT

Educational reform commissions and their reports can be traced back to the massive expansion of public schools during the 1890s. The reports of reform commissions over the years follow the same format: problems are identified, experts are selected to examine them, and improvement proposals are recommended. This report examines 14 national studies over nine decades from the 1890s to the 1980s. Four factors are common to the reform-by-commission process: (1) longevity, (2) generality of recommendations, (3) weak implementation strategies, and (4) limited direct impact of findings and recommendations on school system and classroom behavior. This paper explores these factors and attempts to understand the reform commission phenomenon. The persistence of national commissions cannot be explained in terms of diagnostic and prescriptive effectiveness based on a rational, scientific method. An alternative view stressing the symbolic character of organizational behavior and commission activity as a tribal ceremony is equally difficult to substantiate. A third alternative (bringing together both rational/prescriptive and symbolic/ceremonial elements) is "trickle down" reform, analogous to supply side economics. This approach sanctifies the control and authority of local actors (educators, parents, and the public) and directs them to certain elements in curriculum, instruction, or organization needing improvement. In this view, the commission reform process becomes an act of faith predicated upon pronouncements made with enough strength and drama to survive in spirit, if not letter, the filtering outcomes of trickle down. Commissions do not change schools; local educators and parents are the true reformers. Forty-eight references conclude the document. (MLH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT*

ED284349

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert K. Wimpelberg

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PRESCRIPTION, CEREMONY, OR "TRICKLE DOWN": HOW DO NATIONAL COMMISSIONS TRY TO REFORM EDUCATION?

ROBERT K. WIMPELBERG**

Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations
University of New Orleans
New Orleans, Louisiana 70148

RICK GINSBERG**

Department of Educational Leadership and Policies
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina 29208

EA 019 557

* Revised draft of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C., April, 1987.

** The authors share equal responsibility for the production of this paper.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PRESCRIPTION, CEREMONY, OR "TRICKLE DOWN":

HOW DO NATIONAL COMMISSIONS TRY TO REFORM EDUCATION?

In a recent opinion column, the syndicated writer, James Kilpatrick, applauded reports of improvement in educational performance around the country. "Much of the credit for this remarkable turnabout," he wrote, "is probably owed to the National Commission on Excellence in Education.... [Its report, A Nation at Risk,] was short, superbly written and stunning in its impact" and "...had a galvanic effect. Governors and legislators went to work. Some of the good results are now evident." (Times-Picayune, March 4, 1986).

American education has witnessed the first wave of national reform reports of the 1980s, aimed particularly at high schools, although a new Carnegie Foundation study of elementary schools may signal a second wave in the making. Most commission reports share a process and approach that is characterized by a certain set of elements. Panels of experts are commissioned by an organization, foundation, or governmental unit to examine some aspects of schooling thought to be inadequate and to make proposals for change. Implicitly, educators in local districts, schools, and classrooms are expected to recognize the urgency of the problems identified by the commission, accept the solutions proffered in its report, and begin to implement its recommendations. Whenever gestures from state and local education officials move in synchrony with commission proposals, interested parties, like columnist Kilpatrick, hail them as evidence of commissioned-generated reform in the making. Substantial proof is not necessary.

Ten Decades and Fourteen Reports

Reform commissions and their reports are not a creature of the 1980s. They can be traced back to the massive expansion of the public schools during the "Common School Era" in the nineteenth century and have appeared in great numbers in nearly every decade of this century. Horace Mann's twelve annual reports written as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education (1837-1848) are probably the earliest reform reports. The National Education Association's (NEA) dozen or so committee reports in the half century between 1890 and 1950--the most famous of which being the report of the Committee of Ten (1893)--were among the first major documents produced by a group with national stature and reach. These efforts established a pattern which continues to be replicated today: problems are identified, experts are selected to examine them, and proposals for improvements are recommended.

For this review we began our assessment with the Committee of Ten report published by the National Education Association (NEA) in 1893, and concluded with the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education A Nation at Risk. In total, we examined fourteen studies distributed with a fair degree of evenness across the nine decades from the 1890s to the 1980s. Where there were multiple studies meeting our criteria of selection in the 1930s and 1940s, we chose single, representative examples. We also consulted secondary sources that discussed aspects of the fourteen national reports of interest in this review.

The reports considered are limited to those taking a nationwide focus. This criterion elevates the issue of "reform" to a general level

beyond the idiosyncracies of local or regional differences. A second basis for selecting reports for the present analysis was schooling level: we only examined reports focusing on the American high school. High schools have received the greatest amount of attention from reformers in this century and, therefore, provide the most continuous source of documentation.

Finally, we chose to study reports promulgated by large educational organizations, major foundations, or the federal government, which empaneled teams of "experts" to make or confirm the larger decisions about gathering information, reporting findings, and prescribing recommendations for change. While this limits our investigation by eliminating large numbers of carefully done studies by practitioners and university research faculties, our belief is that the remaining reports more accurately reflect the national condition of reform thinking during the century, and they document a particular kind of investigatory activity.

Four Issues: Longevity, Generality, Implementation, and Impact

In our review of the recent commission reports as well as the history of the reform-by-commission process, we are struck by four factors. First is the longevity of the technique. Beginning in the 1890s, the commission approach to educational change has been a commonplace, and it has spawned replications at national, state, and local levels of educational governance. A second factor is the highly general casting of the recommendations proposed in the typical commission report. Rarely is much specificity given in the reports on

which local educators can act. Third, the commission report tends not to take into account the conditions necessary for change, or stated in the parlance of modern social science, the "implementation process." The fourth pattern we discern is the apparently limited direct impact that commission findings and recommendations have had on school system and classroom behavior. We draw this conclusion from our own analysis of current reform efforts and a review of secondary sources on previous commission reports dating back to the 1890s.

Our purpose here is to explore these four factors and, in the process, attempt to understand the phenomenon of the reform commission and how it works. We conclude from these analyses of major reports produced throughout the century that the extraordinarily persistent procedure of the national commission in education cannot be due to its effectiveness as a diagnostic and prescriptive procedure for educational reform.

We look, then, to alternative explanations. In so doing, we use the extensive commentary and research on national commissions of the early 1980s--in particular the National Commission on Excellence in Education--as the basis of discussion. The most common competing interpretation of the commission process accentuates its symbolic properties. According to this point of view, it is the ceremonial and inspirational qualities of the commission that are most important.

We suggest that characterizations of the commission reform effort, drawing upon the symbolic or other imagery, must draw distinctions among the interests of the several parties to the commission process. Those parties include the people or organizations responsible for calling the

commission exercises into being; the commission members themselves; the national, state, and local public constituencies; federal, state, and local policy makers; and, finally, educators from agency level to the classroom. After such considerations, we propose a new way of thinking about commission reform, one which we offer as a socio-political equivalent of the economic principle nicknamed "trickle down."

Longevity of the Commission Process

Towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, commission-style investigations in education increased in frequency. Beginning in the 1890s numerous, NEA committees studied a variety of topics, including the high school curriculum (Committee of Ten), the operation of rural schools (Committee of Twelve), and the governance of city schools (Committee of Fifteen).

City school systems were an early focal point of such inquiries. One of the most comprehensive studies was conducted by a Chicago commission lead by University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper. Its "Harper Report" published in 1899 was produced by eleven distinguished Chicagoans who were advised by over 125 experts from around the country. After the turn of the century, the term "survey" became the common synonym for "study" in educational circles following the publication of the Pittsburgh community survey of 1907. Local school surveys often replicated the national commission model, utilizing panels of nationally recognized experts to examine local problems and propose solutions. National leaders like George Strayer of Teachers College, Ellwood Cubberley of Stanford, and Charles Judd of Chicago

headed teams that conducted local, state and national investigations. Over time, many of the nationwide studies were initiated by professional and philanthropic organizations like the NEA and its professional subdivisions (e.g., the Department of Superintendence and Educational Policies Commission), the Progressive Educational Association, the Cleveland Conference and the Russell Sage Foundation.

Evidence of the popularity of the commission approach is substantial. An Indiana University study team found 234 survey reports in the university library covering 1910 to 1927 (Indiana University, School of Education Bulletin, 1927). A University of Chicago master's thesis (Owens, 1928) cataloged 516 school surveys conducted between 1910 and 1928. And Russsell and Judd (1940) in their textbook, The American Educational System, reported a total of 3,022 different school surveys between 1910 and 1935.

The most well known commission style reports since the 1890s include the NEA's Report of the Committee of Ten (1893), The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, written by the NEA Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (1918), The American High School Today, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation in 1959, and the 1983 report, A Nation at Risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. In a second echelon of prominence among the hundreds of other commission investigations prior to World War II are studies by the NEAs Educational Policy Commission in the 1930s on the purpose and function of schooling, by the NEAs Department of Secondary School Principals in the 1930s also on the topics of purpose and function, and by the Progressive Education Association--an "eight year" study

published in the 1940s. In recent years, the studies that garnered the most attention were the Kettering Foundation's work on the reform of secondary education (1973 report), Mortimer Adler's Paideia Proposal, 1982, and The Carnegie Foundation's High School (1983), written by Ernest Boyer.

Summarizing the nature of the phenomenon, reform-by- commission, William Van Til (1975) concluded that

> in American education a major reform movement may be said to have officially arrived when it receives the sanction and blessing of influential philanthropic institutions, government agencies, educational organizations, and/or assorted prestigious committees and commissions. (p. 493)

Based on Van Til's observation, our review of the history of commission investigations would suggest that "major reform movements" have erupted in every decade for the past 100 years.

General Nature of Recommendations

A review of the major commission reports on education reveals a consistent pattern of general recommendations for improvement. Although the emphasis in the reports' proposals has changed over time, the non-specific nature of their recommendations has persisted. Paul Peterson (1985) finds the commission reports particularly disappointing on this score:

> If we judge them by standards ordinarily used to evaluate policy analysis--focused statement of the problem to be analyzed, methodological evaluation of existing research,

> reasoned consideration of options, and presentation of supporting evidence and argumentation for well-specified proposals--they simply do not measure up.... [T]he studies do not address the most difficult conceptual and political issues. (pp. 126-127)

Commission reports usually pass along recommendations that include too little detail and direction for practitioners to clearly understand what is intended. Many recommendations in commission reports resemble the vague pronouncements of the U.S. Supreme Court--that desegregation should proceed "with all deliberate speed" (Brown, 1954) or that consitutional rights for students may only be abridged if behavior "materially and substantially" interferes with school operations (Tinker, 1969). For example, the Committee of Ten (1893) urged high schools to adapt their curricula to "help prepare students for life's work"; The Cardinal Principles (1918) suggested the students be taught ethics (as one of its seven objectives) through "proper instructional methodology, social contacts, school spirit of service, responsibility and initiative"; the report of the Educational Policies Commission Report on functions of schooling (1937) called for "developing the mind, spirit and body of students through social, practical and fine arts training"; and A Nation at Risk (1983), which enumerated specific years for high school studies in subjects like science, English and mathematics, did not specify what aspects of science, English, or mathematics should be taught. One can conclude that commissions do not intend to prescribe the specific elements of school reform, but rather to lay out broad guidelines for reform.

Peterson (1985) suggests that commissions discuss reform at a general level because it is easy for commission members to agree on the broad goals of schooling but difficult and potentially divisive to discover ways to achieve them. First of all, it may be impossible to specify a single reform option for some 15,000 different school districts composed of thousands more schools. Environmental circumstances, general capabilities of students and staffs, public support, revenue potential, and other factors differ from locale to locale, making exact directives for all schools an unrealistic possibility. Just as the Supreme Court is often intentionally vague in its remedies for a diverse, heterogeneous, and sometimes intractable society, national commissions may be consciously ambiguous in their recommendations for change.

Of equal importance is the political dimension of commission work. To focus on a few aspects of the curriculum to the exclusion of others or to lay blame for specific inadequacies at the doorstep of one or two parties while, by default, exonerating others, threatens to gore the oxen of some professional groups and reduce the influence of some special curricular interests. Historically, commissions have been made up of representatives of the educational professionals and interests, and the political sensitivity engendered in the commission selection process requires that findings be generalized and recommendations be abstracted as a kind of protective measure.

A final cause for the non-specificity in commission recommendations may arise from limitations in the technologies of the commission process. It appears that commissions seldom follow the basic canons of

social scientific research. The validity or reliability of findings is never clear, testable, or seemingly even a concern. How data are selected, samples drawn, and conclusions reached are rarely defined. Rather, recommendations are often the simple reflection of opinions held by the commission panel. Commission membership, after all, is frequently based on the legitimacy that individuals can lend, not on any particular expertise in teaching and learning or demonstrated rigor in scientific investigations of school reform and the social, political, and educational complexity that attends it.

Directions For Implementation

An issue that runs parallel to the nature of the recommendations for change advanced by a commission is the process of implementation. If the recommendations relate to what it is that needs fixing, the question of implementation raises the equally important issue of how change is likely to be accomplished. As we have learned from the close study of change in the past few decades, implementation can involve any number of complex processes (see, for example, Fullan [1982], and Berman & McLaughlan [1976]). Even that simple understanding is relatively new; only since the influx of federal money and programs in the 1960s has implementation even been studied. Prior to that time, as Thomas Smith (1973) has noted, scholars and policy makers operated under the faulty assumption "that once a policy has been made the policy will be implemented" (p. 197). As we will see in the discussion on impact in the following section of this paper, commission reports are testimony to this erroneous logic, for commission reports have tended to ignore the

many problems associated with making changes or facilitating them to happen.

Students of change have identified a variety of conditions necessary for changes to be implemented successfully. For example, support and commitment at the point of implementation are essential, whether the classroom, school, or district (Fullan, 1982). According to Loucks and Hall (1979), change is a multi-staged process that often requires special assistance (resources or coaching) and ample time, so that new instructional behavior and curricular content can become integrated into classroom and school routines.

These factors, like others, are hard to achieve through the commission process because the source of change is so removed from those who would manage the implementation. The one kind of assistance that an external and removed agent can provide in some cases is financial support, yet in the typical case, once their reports are written, commissions only have money left to disseminate their recommendations. A scholar of the public policy process summed up the importance of attending to implementation in the following way:

> The greatest difficulty in devising better social programs is not in determining what appear to be reasonable policies on paper but in finding the means for converting these policies into viable field operations that correspond reasonably well to specifications. (Williams, 1976, p. 5)

Impact of Commission Reforms

Closely allied to the issue of implementation is the impact of reform proposals on schools. Education involves teaching and learning, and the ultimate goal of any set of reforms must be related to changing what teachers and students do. Recognizing this criterion of evaluation for reform activity is considerably easier than pinning down "impact" primarily because it can be difficult to establish cause and effect. Perhaps this is why many critiques of commission reports do not assess the impact of reform recommendations. Our review and analysis of the literature that does investigate impact reveals a pattern of minimal direct effect on schools. Furthermore, in the few cases where teaching or curricula had been modified in line with commission recommendations, the change effects were short-lived. This pattern is particularly consistent in the follow-up studies that systematically collected data to look at impact.

Edwin Dexter (1906) conducted a close study of the curricular proposals in the Report of the Committee of Ten (1893), sampling 80 schools in 1895 and 1904 to reveal the extent to which the Committee's prescriptions were put into practice. He concluded that although the report directed attention to the problems of curriculum, it did not influence to any marked degree the curriculum of public high schools. Dexter's conclusion is corroborated by the historian, Henry Perkinson (1968), who found that in 1920 only a minority of high school students followed a program of study similar to that proposed by the Committee.

The next major commission report, The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (1918), is depicted by high school historian Mark

Krug as not arousing much discussion, much less identifiable change. Krug (1964) attributed its failed impact in part to concern over the First World War. In 1928, ten years after the release of The Cardinal Principles, the NEA Department of Superintendence attempted an analysis of impact by surveying 1,228 high school principals, and found that about one-half of them claimed to undertake some reorganization it line with the report, while over-one fifth had never even heard of it (Krug, 1964, p. 398). An appraisal in 1951 by a person who had participated in the preparation The Cardinal Principles took note of the verbal applause it had received but deplored the great tendency of educators to ignore its recommendations (Briggs, 1951).

Many commission reports were issued in the 1930s and 40s, but published analyses of their impact is severely limited. Much of the extensive commentary following the two reports on "issues" and "functions" of education prepared by the Committee on the Reorientation of Secondary Education (NEA Department of Secondary School Principals, 1936-37) dealt with the content of the reports. One writer, for example, criticized the triviality of the subject matter--what he called "tweedledum-tweedledee" issues (in Krug, 1972, p. 274). Krug (1972) argues that the subsequent reports on the "purposes" and "functions" of schooling (Educational Policies Commission, 1937-38) were largely ignored because, shortly after their release, the attention of educators shifted to matters the reports did not discuss (p. 253).

The apparent exception during this period of time would seem to be The Eight Year Study (1942), a report by the Progressive Education Association (PEA) that had an investigation of reform effects built into

it. The Eight Year Study analyzed the college success of students from 29 high schools with PEA-recommended experimental curricula data by comparing them with students from traditional schools. The authors of the report were encouraged by the performance of "progressive" students compared to their "traditional counterparts. However, a study by Redefer (1952) found that little remained of the actual experimental programs that had prepared the students.

About the same time Hollis Caswell (1946) of Teachers College reviewed the 1944 report, Education for All American Youth (Educational Policies Commission, re-released in 1952). While he offered no empirical data on its impact, he concluded, nevertheless, that it was highly improbable that even so admirable a report as Education for All American Youth could be the primary source of change in classrooms and schools.

Conant's American High School Today, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, was released with ample fanfare in 1959, along with high expectations for its potential to influence school boards and educators. Conant enjoyed the prestige of a former President of Harvard University and Ambassador to Germany. Working with four collaborators and supported by a research staff, Conant and others had visited 55 high schools in 18 states to draw up their recommendations. Nevertheless, A. Harry Passow (1984) found that, other than forcing some modifications or consolidation of small schools, the 21 recommendations of the report brought little reform. He suggests that the prescriptions in the report were expressed in such a manner that administrators could claim their programs already met Conant standards.

The story of the 1970s is remarkably similar. The commission report of note here is Reform of Secondary Education (1972) produced under the sponsorship of the Kettering foundation. As with earlier reports, no systematic evaluations of impact have been undertaken, though the report was derided by one writer as a document that "does not afford a much needed new sense of direction for the high school curriculum...(Cawelti, 1974, p. 93). Another writer, lamenting over the ineffectiveness of the several important reports of the 1970s and offering an explanation to historians who would eventually review reform in this decade, pointed to the social setting of the time rather than any weaknesses in the recommendations themselves. Quoting Shakespeare, he submitted that "the time is out of joint" (Van Til, 1975).

Finally, the current decade has been flooded by reports from groups like the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), the Paidiea group, the Carnegie Foundation, the Twentieth Century Fund, the College Board and others. Volumes of pages have been written about these reports, some taking up entire issues of major educational journals (Harvard Educational Review [February, 1984], Education and Urban Society [February, 1985], Phi Delta Kappan [April, 1984]). Yet even in the 1980s, analysis of the direct impact of specific recommendations has been limited or have been done as considerable distance from schools and classrooms. Most critiques have simply debated the quality of report recommendations (Wimpelberg & Ginsberg, 1985a). Somewhat closer to assessing commission impact, the U.S. Department of Education, sponsor of the NCEE, has periodically catalogued reform activity in the states, allowing for the inference

that evidence of the activity reported to it by state education agencies constituted a response to commission recommendations. Other studies have looked at shifts in spending trends, and the specialized weekly newspaper, Education Week (1985), surveyed state officials to gauge reform activity. Seldom is the issue of direct impact discussed. One exception is a survey of superintendents and principals in Louisiana related to the NCEE report, A Nation at Risk (Wimpelberg & Ginsberg, 1985b). Reminiscent of the few impact studies of early decades, the Louisiana research on A Nation at Risk could document only tenuous relationships between the most publicized report of the 1980s and school and school-district policies.

As a starting point for explaining the apparent lack of direct commission impact on practice, we can appeal to the general characteristics of reform reports discussed in the opening sections of this review. The highly abstract nature of recommendations and lack of attention to implementation certainly are implied here. The impact of reform recommendations will be constrained when practitioners cannot interpret their exact intentions or do not have the technical or financial means to implement them.

Another explanation may lie in the disjointedness that characterizes the educational systems in this country. One version of this condition, now called "loose coupling" after the term applied to it by Weick (1976), observes that classroom activity in the typical school is not tightly controlled by the principal. Nor for that matter, is the work of assistant administrators, counselors, or other professional personnel usually integrated with classroom learning. In short, the

parts of the system inside the individual school are not interrelated. This popular use of the imagery of disjointedness can be called "horizontal" loose coupling. In understanding limitations on the impact of commission reports we may view the entire organization of schooling in the country as "vertically" loosely coupled. That is, activity in schools is only loosely controlled by district office policies, and districts retain considerable latitude within the policies set by state government and state educational agencies; control by federal government (much less gratuitous commissions) is even more tenuous. The full distance between classrooms and national commission, then, is considerable and is riddled with weak or non-existant control mechanisms. Guthrie's (1985) discussion of the decentralized nature of educational governance emphasizes this point:

> The multitiered system for public schools is rendered even more complex by several social and political conditions which overlie governance. For example, at any particular education policy making level there exists a sizable cadre of significant political actors... Additionally, public tastes for schooling vary by locality and region....It is even possible to identify varying regional patterns of school governance resulting from historical development, economic conditions and governmental structures.
>
> The complex and decentralized nature of American education decision making is probably unmatched in any other industrialized nation. Not only do individuals familiar with far more centralized national systems find it difficult to comprehend, but even U.S.

citizens and public officials find it frustrating when they wish to see policies implemented quickly and efficiently (p. 323).

Understanding Educational Reform Commissions

What, then, can be said about the commission process? We know that historically they are a popular mechanism which continue to enjoy wide appeal. We also realize that their popularity persists in spite of the fact that they make only very general suggestions to resolve the problems identified and that they offer little help with the troublesome process of implementing policies. Commission activity also continues in the face of little documented change in school practice that can be directly attributed to commission reports. The question remains: why the commission?

Commission activity as scientific method

The standard formulation through which most commissions approach their work would, on the face of it, seem to reflect a rational, diagnostic/prescriptive impulse. The sponsoring group is aware of a problem state in education, calls together a panel of experts, commissions a broad data base of papers and testimony for the experts to comprehend, and derives solutions to fit the evidence as it has been analyzed by the panel of experts.

This picture of commission work is the most easily cast aside, at least based on the procedural norms of commissions in evidence in the documents they produce. As we have discussed eariler, there is little semblence of careful scientific method in the workings of the commission (although many of them itemize their sometimes extensive sources of

"data."). Harnischfeger and Wiley (1976) suggest that the expert approach to educational reform will seldom carry out scientific procedures if it is undertaken in a "political" atmosphere because

> political decisions...are too often based on beliefs about rather than knowledge of the causalities of social relations. The reason for this is usually not the unwillingness of politicains to consider evidence relating to any issue, but a lack of the evidence that might rationalize their decisions. The testimony of committes of expert advisors all too often exemplifies this lack (p. 7).

With complex relationships in the chains of educational cause-and-effect and with belief systems that overpower whatever data that might be valid, the commission plays out a process that appears to be diagnostic and prescriptive but misses the mark of educational reality too widely to be functional.

Commission activity as ceremony

One kind of analysis of socio-political events that has gained wide appeal in recent years stresses the symbolic character of organizational and institutional behavior. Deal (1985) has applied symbolic analysis to the modern educational commission as an alternative means to understand the phenomenon. He likens the commission process to ancient tribal ceremonies, choreographed with symbolic gestures which convey signals to the populace. Rather than viewing commission reports as rational documents prepared in order to shape schools in some explicit manner, Deal's symbolic interpretation emphasizes the drama of the ceremony.

National commissions, therefore, should not be expected to change school practices through the specificity of reform recommendations, but rather may indirectly influence perceptions, attitudes, and, in time, behaviors by starting a "federal dance" that can will get people moving at other institutional levels--state and local. Rather than show that states or locals have "taken up the dance," Deal exhorts local school leaders to create their own ceremonies that will give a decentralized, yet reformed shape to educational practice and values.

Deal's argument is powerful. His observation that the recent reports revitalized and strengthened our interest in education is important. Although he was only analyzing the commission activity of the 1980s, his argument offers a rationale for the longevity and uniformity of the commission approach. The general nature of recommendations, the lack of attention to implementation and the minimal direct impact of the reports are more easily understood if the commission process is viewed as ceremony rather than blueprint making. However, the ceremonial thesis leaves open the question of intention--do the commission members themselves <u>intend</u> to be dancers rather than architects? Or does it matter what commissions intend?

Symbolists, like Deal, can make their case by appealing to state and local actors simply to <u>use</u> the reform impulse that is amplified, if not originated, by national commissions. State and local policy makers and educators can both "join the dance" and get reforms enacted, regardless of their philosophical or structural similarity to the sensibilities and prescriptions of commission members. Because of its causal looseness, such a chain of events is difficult to corroborate and

the impact, real or tenuous, of national commissions remains elusive. Furthermore, our historical review reminds us that the typical commission report is characterized by its obscurity than by its ceremonial (not to mention prescriptive) quality.

We think an alternative conceptualization of the commission process that focuses upon the hierarchical and authoritative positioning of the national commission as an institution can help understand the phenomenon. This alternative point of view will also bring us back to the issues of intention and ceremony.

Commission activity as "trickle down" reform

A third alternative for interpreting the commission experience in education is captured in the idea of "trickle down reform." Analogous to the philosophy of the supply-side economics, trickle down educational reform would sanctify the control and authority of local actors--educators, parents, and public. At the same time, trickle down reform attempts to give explicit shape to the thinking of local actors and attempts to direct them to certain elements in curriculum, instruction, or organization that should be emphasized.

Supply-side economics, first espoused by economist Arthur Laffer (Wanniski, 1978), calls for tax cuts and incentives coupled with tight monetary controls with reduced government spending to stimulate expansion of the private sector. Supply-side economics was intended to reduce inflation, balance the federal budget, and increase the output of goods and services and expand employment opportunities. Critics of this approach labeled it "trickle down" economics, to express the idea that

lessening economic constraints on the wealthy (by moving away from federal policies of income redistribution) were assumed to carry eventual benefits in expanded job opportunities and salary levels for the masses. The idea of indirect benefits that may reach those in the lower income brackets as a result of direct incentives for the owners of business was packaged in the wrappings of an economic philosophy called "supply-side" economics. As former federal Budget Director David Stockman (Greider, 1981) conceded:

> It's kind of hard to sell "trickle down," so the supply side formula was the only way to get a tax policy that was really "trickle down." Supply-side is "trickle-down" theory." (p. 47)

Without discussing the strengths or deficiencies of such an economic philosophy, the underlying suppositions in the trickle down approach carry meaning for understanding the commission process. To be sure, commission hearings, findings, and recommendations do not benefit one "class" of schools more than another, unless their focus on public schools may be thought to tacitly exempt the efforts of private schools from criticism. What is arguably similar about the commission process and economic trickle down is that strong, dramatic gestures (if not policies) are adopted at an upper, national level that are intended to filter down through the several layers of state, district, school, and classroom. At times national commissions direct their reform recommendations at discrete levels of political or administrative governance, yet before any recommendation can be converted into state or district policy, much less classroom practice, it must at least provoke

discussion, be modified to fit state or local curricular and structural contexts, and be cast in regulatory language that can lead to monitoring and enforcement.

In contrast to the ceremonial interpretation of national commission activity in which higher level actors may help create an atmosphere in which local officials can accomplished individualistic reform, the trickle down thesis allows that commission sponsors and commission members have, to some degree, a set of parameters for what counts as legitimate remedies. As in the imagery of trickling down, the substance called "water" that leaves the commission pail is still "water" after it has filtered through the layers of sediment and reached the subterean of school and classroom. It gets there, however, as so many discrete drops and not as a stream.

To some degree, then, the commission reform process is an act of faith predicated upon pronouncements that are made with enough strength and drama that they may "survive" in spirit, if not letter, the filtering outcomes of trickle down. Only recommendations made in non-specific language can be supported in this process, and attention to implementation at the national level is inappropriate because of the sequence of modifications implied in the filtering process. The motivations of commission members to produce some rather specific changes in educational outcomes, then, are dampened by the political and structural realities of the vertical loose coupling inherent in state level autonomy and the ideology of local control. That poses a real dilemma for the role of the commission member that can be mitigated by

an anticipation that national pronouncements may "trickle down" to produce the eventual result of local reform.

"Trickle down" captures an interplay between prescription and ceremony. That interplay is expressed, to some extent, in the report, A Nation at Risk, itself. On the one hand, the commission sounds as though it views its recommendations as specific enough for implementation, and it appears to advocate a definable reform position. The following statements reflect these ideas:

- State and local officials...should incorporate the reforms we propose in their educational policies and fiscal planning (p. 32, empahsis added).

- This commission calls upon educators, parents and public officials to assist in bringing about the educational reform proposed in this report (p. 33, emphasis added).

- Our final word, perhaps better characterized as a plea, is that all segments of our population give attention to the implementation of our recommendations (p. 36, emphasis added).

In contrast, the language used in the report acknowledges local flexibility and modifications:

> Many schools, districts, and States are already giving serious and constructive attention to these matters, even though their plans may differ from our recommendations in some details (p. 23).

Further support for the argument that this commission (NCEE) faced a quandry of intention is generated from data we collected from members.

We constructed a questionnaire composed of items that asked about the procedures used to prepare the report, as well as the commission members' reactions to published criticism of the report. Thirteen of the 18 NCEE commissioners responded to certain questionnaire items in such a way that the interplay between a desire for specific educational outcomes and knowing the limitations on their influence are apparent. On the one hand, some described their task as a kind of diagnostic/ prescriptive process, as captured in the following comments:

- to examine data, analyze papers, listen to testimony, discuss issues and recommend conclusions
- to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of American secondary education and to help construct a document which would help our educational system build on strengths and evaluate and correct weaknesses
- to be fully involved and push for what I thought would improve education

On the other hand, some express a more equivocal impression of the task of the commission member. One position combines the more direct diagnostic/prescriptive approach with the inspirational quality of the ceremony and captures the elements of "trickle down" in a single task statement: "to form opinions...to help prepare an informative appraisal written in such a way that it would get the maximum readership and attention by state and local communities." Other members were even more keenly aware of the several layers of influentials situated between the

national commission and the students in classrooms. A couple of comments about commission task capture this perspective:

- to represent state policy setters and share their role with the commission
- to be a missionary for the children to insure their opportunity to learn and an appropriate educational experience

NCEE members were also asked to assess the effect of A Nation at Risk. Here their acceptance of a "trickle down" effect is clearly evident. Members expressed pleasure that "the ripples continue to make waves," "that education has been placed on the front burner," "that the document has been a catalyst for discussion and productive activity," and that "schools and teachers who considered the issue reacted with renewed vigor to improve their situation." Although no one cited specific translation of commission recommendations into school practice, the commission members projected a sense of accomplishment in sparking debate and reform activity around the issues identified and enumerated in A Nation at Risk.

Conclusions

It would be erroneous to argue that schools are the only institutions which have been scrutinized by commission panels. Politicians at all levels of government have utilized commissions of experts to prepare advisory reports on numerous issues. Thomas Wolanin's (1975) in depth study of presidential commissions reviews the functions and purposes of commissions appointed from Presidents Truman through Johnson. Robert Alford's (1975) work on the New York City

health care system includes an analysis of commission investigations from 1950 to 1971. Lipsky and Olson (1977) reviewed race riot commission reports conducted during the racial upheaval of the 1960s and called their study Commission Politics. In education, studies have examined all levels of schooling through the university years. Commission investigation activity has therefore touched different parts of society and nearly every aspect of schooling during the twentieth century.

Given this proviso, what do we know about educational reform by commission and the effects of its exercises? First, an analysis of the documents that commissions have produced across the sweep of the last nine decades suggests that the process has been used in a persistent and unflagging manner by varieties of sponsoring groups from professional organizations to foundations to government. Second, the recommendations and discussions from educational commissions tend to be cast in non-specific language, and little, if any, attention is paid to the financial or procedural requirements for putting recommendations into practice. Third, there is meager evidence that reform commissions have directly affected behavior in schools and classrooms.

In this paper we analyzed educational commissions from the 1890s until today in order to strengthen the current understanding of this very popular technique of attempting reform. Our analyses lead us to suggest that "trickle down" is the most appropriate label for describing the experience of commissions during the past ninety years. The image brings together elements of the rational /prescriptive and the symbolic/ceremonial. In the process, it accounts for complexities in

the translation of policy positions to practice and in the commission process itself.

We do not intend to imply that commissions are good or bad, or that they cannot spark widespread discussion of issues. To the contrary, many national commissions have generated much dialogue, although the actual impact on classrooms around the country seems very limited. Commissions respond to problems, raise issues and offer solutions. It is beyond the scope of their ability, however, to make any changes in schools. Ultimately, it is local school officials, teachers, and parents who must undertake the difficult task of reform.

References

Adler, M.J. (1982). Paideia proposal. New York: Macmillan.

Aiken, W.J. (1942). Story of the eight year study. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Alford, R. (1975). Health care politics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berman, P., and McLaughlin, M.W. (1976). Implementation of educational innovations. Educational Forum, 40, 345-370.

Boyer, E.L. (1983). High school: Report on secondary education in America. New York: Harper & Row.

Briggs, T.H. (1951). The secondary school curriculum: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Teachers College Record, 52, 408-09.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

Cawelti, G. (1974). A review of the reports' advice to the public and the profession. NASSP Bulletin, 58, 86-93.

Caswell, H.L. (1946). The American high school: Its responsibility and opportunity. New York: Harper and Bros.

Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. (1918). Cardinal principles of secondary education. Bulletin 1918, no. 35. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Commission on the Reorientation of Secondary Education. (1936). Issues of secondary education. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Commission on the Reorientation of Secondary Education. (1937). Functions of secondary education. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Committee on Secondary School Studies (Committee of Ten). (1893). Report of the Committee on Secondary School Studies (National Education Association). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Conant, J.B. (1959). American high school today. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Deal, T.E. (1985). National commissions: Blueprints for remodeling or ceremonies for revitalizing public schools? Education and Urban Society, 17, 145-156.

Dexter, E.G. (1906). Ten years' influence of the Report of the Committee of Ten. School Review, 14, 264.

Education and Urban Society. (1985). The national reform reports. 17, 115-240.

Educational Policies Commission. (1937). Unique functions of education in American democracy. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Educational Policies Commission. (1944). Education for ALL American youth. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Excellence: A 50 state survey. (1985) Education Week, IV, 11-30

Fullan, M. (1982). The meaning of educational change. New York: Teachers College Press.

Greider, W. (1981). The education of David Stockman. Atlantic Monthly, 248, 47.

Guthrie, J.W. (1985). The educational policy consequences of economic instability: The emerging political economy of American education. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 7, 319-332.

Harnischfeger, A. and Wiley, D. (1976). The teaching-learning process in elementary schools: A synoptic view. Curriculum Inquiry, 6, 5-43.

Harvard Educational Review. (1984). Symposium on the year of the reports: Responses from the educational community. 54, 1-31.

Indiana University School of Education. (1927). Topical analyses of 234 school surveys. Indiana University School of Education Bulletin, 3 (March).

Krug, E.A. (1964). The shaping of the American high school. New York: Harper & Row.

Krug, E.A. (1972). The shaping of the American high school: 1920-1941. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Lipsky, M. and Olson, D. (1977). Commission politics. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Loucks, S. and Hall, G. (1979, April). Implementing innovations in schools: A concerns based approach. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education. (1973). The reform of secondary education: A report to the public and the profession. New York: McGraw-Hill.

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

Owens, A.C. (1928). The survey movement in education. Unpublished master's degree thesis. University of Chicago.

Passow, A.H. (1984). Reforming schools in the 1980s: A critical review of the national reports. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University / ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

Perkinson, H.J. (1968). The imperfect panacea: American faith in education, 1865-1965. New York: Random House.

Peterson, P.E. (1985). Did the education commissions say anything? Education and Urban Society, 17, 126-144.

Phi Delta Kappan. (1984). After the great debate. (April), 514.

Redefer, F.L. (1952). The eight year study--Eight years later. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Teachers College, Columbia University.

Russell, J.D. and Judd, C.H. (1940). The American educational system. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Smith, T.B. (1973). The policy implementation process. Policy Sciences, 4, 197-209.

Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, 393 U.S. 503 (1969)

Van Til, W. (1975). Reform of the high school in the mid-1970s. Phi Delta Kappan, 56, 493-494.

Wanniski, J. (1978). Taxes, revenues, and the Laffer curve. The Public Interest, 3-16.

Weick, K. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. Administrative Science Quarterly, 21, 1-19.

Williams, W. (1976). Introduction. In W. Williams & R.F. Elmore (Eds.), Social program implementation (pp. 1-9). New York: Academic Press.

Wimpelberg, R.K. and Ginsberg, R. (1985a). Reviewing the critiques of reform commissions. Politics of Education Bulletin, 12, 1, 10-13, 16.

Wimpelberg, R.K. and Ginsberg, R. (1985b). Are schools districts responding to A Nation at Risk? Education and Urban Society, 17, 186-203.

Wolanin, T.R. (1975). Presidential advisory commissions. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.